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GNOSTIC GENESIS ACCOUNT

Gnostic Genesis Account

Elaine H. Pagels, the scholar who has contributed more than any other to the popular interest in Gnosticism, found herself in the capital city of Sudan holding a discussion with the foreign minister of that country. This man, a member of the Dinka tribe, told her how the creation myth of his people has exerted a lasting influence on many aspects of their social and cultural life. Not only did this tribe in the Sudan, called the Dinka, but also Americans are still influenced by their creation myth. Pagels realized that Americans and Dinka tribesmen are not so very different; the creation myths of both are still vital and relevant today.

Most Westerners assume that Western culture has only one creation myth: the one in the first three chapters of Genesis. Few seem to be aware that there is an alternative - the creation myth of the Gnostics. This myth may strike us as novel and startling, yet it offers views of the creation and of our lives that are well worth considering. The Gnostics based all of their teaching upon "knowing" through first-hand experience rather than blind faith. The Greek word for "knowing" is Gnosis. Theirs, was an Inner Mystery of esotericism rather than the literal historical interpretations offered by the Roman Church.

William Blake, the Gnostic poet of the early nineteenth century, wrote: "Both read the Bible day and night, but you read black where I read white." Similar words might have been uttered by early Gnostics about their opponents in the ranks of Judaism and "literalistic" Christianity. The non-Gnostic, or orthodox, view in early Christendom regarded most of the Bible, particularly Genesis, as history with a moral. Adam and Eve were historical personages whose tragic transgression resulted in the Fall, and from their Fall later human beings were to learn moral lessons. One consequence of this type of reading of Genesis was the contradictory status of women, who were regarded as Eve's co-conspirators in disobedience in Paradise. Tertullian, one of the church fathers who despised the Gnostics, wrote this to a group of Christian women:

"You are the devil's gateway ... You are she who persuaded him whom the devil did not dare attack ... Do you know that you are each an Eve? The sentence of God on your sex lives on in this age; the guilt, necessarily, lives on too."

This anti-feminine "bias" finds life in the church down through history and often even today and it has always struck me as strange ... since Gnosticism valued the equality of women with men, and since Paul often send his Epistles by way of women I felt it strange that this same Paul would censure women in the church so much.

Just where do we find these anti-feminine comments of Paul? Well some of your guessed it; the later forgeries of the Pastoral Epistles that modern scholarship teach us is not from the hand of Paul but from the hand of "orthodox" forgers of later Patriarchal Christianity. Paul more than likely only wrote 7 of the 13 Epistles credited to him, and even those were edited, changed, and revised to fit the desires of the Roman Church System.

Gnosticism And Genesis

The "traditional" interpretation of the story of Adam and Eve is that they disobeyed God by eating the forbidden fruit (or apple), which is the origin of what is labeled as "Original Sin." Traditional Christians in Western Christianity, grow up being taught that this story is "literal" Truth and that Adam and Eve were literally "two" individual human persons. Yet many scholars and historical exegesis of these passages from Genesis present a totally different interpretation of Adam and Eve. It might shock you to find out that the earliest Christians also saw Adam and Eve not as "two" separate persons. In truth this "allegory" symbolizes the major step in our evolution from animal to human, a transition which spanned millions of years. A journey into consciousness and awareness, Spirit and matter.

Occasionally people refer to Adam and Eve eating from the Tree of Knowledge. They leave off the "of good and evil part", which is crucial. The Biblical passage clearly states that they ate from the Tree of The Knowledge of Good and Evil. If it were merely the Tree of Knowledge, the passage would make no sense whatsoever.

God/Source said: "Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat: But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die."

Later, the Serpent assured Eve that what God had told her was untrue, and that her fears were unfounded:

"Ye shall not surely die. For God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods ... "

Adam and Eve ate the fruit, and when God/Source realized this, He said: "Behold, the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil; and now, lest he put forth his hand, and take also of the Tree of Life, and eat, and live forever."

Do you really understand what you just read? Think about it. Deeply. God/Source just confirmed what the Serpent had said when he tempted Eve. Read it again if you have to. God/Source just confirmed that what the Serpent said was, in fact, TRUE. Now they have Souls, and their consciousness lives forever, even after their bodies are gone. "They have become as one of us." They have become as the Gods/Elohim (plural).

In the traditional interpretation, the Serpent is considered, wicked. Its plain from the text that the Serpent was perfectly truthful in everything he said to Adam and Eve, and the fact that he was telling the truth is somehow overlooked, as is the fact that God deceived them, at least until the point at which they ate the fruit. This is an inescapable conclusion, and God/Source admits it much later on. The fact that God lied to them is also ignored or glossed over by the traditional "literal historical" interpretation.

So who then, is this "God" that would deceive and lie? Is this the same "God" of Genesis chapter one or a different one? Well the Gnostic teachings tell us but few are willing to listen.

God told Adam and Eve if they ate from that one specific tree, they would die. But clearly, they ate from the specific tree, and they didn't die. It could be argued that, in the very broadest sense of the word, that they did die, the change in them being so great, their former selves and their former lives being lost forever. However, a stronger case could be made that God simply deceived them. Maybe it was for their own good, but, according to scripture ... He deceived them, nevertheless. God goes on to confirm everything the Serpent predicted, and Adam and Eve became as gods.

How did the Serpent know all these things? What exactly is meant by knowledge of good and evil? It means morality, a distinctly "human" trait. It means the entire array of emotions, beliefs, and behaviors that goes along with it, such as the assumption of free-will, desire for approval and respect, fear of rejection, guilt, pride, envy, admiration, desire for revenge, ambition, anxiety, shame, remorse, love - in short, ALL the emotions that make up the glue holding human social groups together, motivating members to suppress hostile impulses, forgo selfish interests, and work for the common good of all of creation. Eventually, this leads to the development of civilization, along with its numerous ramifications.

Acquiring the knowledge of good and evil means evolving from animals to human beings. Becoming human was both a blessing, and a curse. There was much to be gained from it - as the Serpent said, "your eyes shall be opened". But it carried with it - a steep price. God/Source said to Eve, "I will increase your labor and in labor you shall bear children." Why specifically that? Because becoming human meant becoming more intelligent, and in order to do that, their brains had to grow larger, resulting in extremely painful births which lower primates, with smaller head-to-body ratios, do not experience. This evolution of larger brains, along with an unavoidable increase in pain during childbirth, is at the very heart of the process of becoming human.

Before, they were naked, but unashamed, their sexuality uninhibited, like animals. Afterwards, they suddenly realized they were naked, and they stitched loincloths from fig leaves. Strong social restrictions on sexual behavior characterize any civilized people, and make up an integral part of the whole cluster of moral beliefs and behaviors that distinguish us from lower animals. Remember, we're still the only ones in the Animal Kingdom to wear clothes. Can you imagine everyone walking around naked all the time?

When Adam and Eve were cast out of the Garden, they began the long, Faustian journey to human-hood, striving for understanding and mastery. God said to Adam, "You shall gain your bread by the sweat of your brow until you return to the ground." No longer could he pluck fruit from a tree when he got hungry the way a monkey or other animals do. He cultivated the land, tended his flock, and put away food for hard times. He had the intelligence to envision the horror of famine, and he knew if he didn't work hard and plan wisely, he and his family would starve.

Back in the security and isolation of The Garden, good and evil were hardly prominent concepts. But suddenly they become very real, and very potent forces, in human social groups where survival itself is uncertain. Good is whatever helps the group/race as a whole to survive and prosper - courage, honesty, unselfishness, intelligence, hard work. Evil is whatever harms the group/race - cowardice, dishonesty, selfishness, stupidity, and laziness.

The concepts of good and evil were integrated into the culture. Parents taught children to share, to be honest, and to consider the feelings of others. The concepts became internalized, along with all the whole vast array of emotions, both powerful and subtle, that go with them. For example, a man feels instinctive rage when he discovers his wife with another man. People feel spontaneous resentment upon witnessing the selfish or deceitful behavior of others. They experience fear and anxiety when they imagine themselves persecuted or excluded by the group for engaging in forbidden acts. And they feel pride after being praised for making a major contribution to the group. All of these pleasant and unpleasant emotions form a system of positive and negative reinforcement that molds the behavior of individuals and keeps the group working successfully as a unit.

The importance of the group is paramount, for we know that human beings must band together in order to survive. Groups with a highly developed morality survived in greater numbers than those without it, thus the genetic predisposition increased in the population. The most successful hunters and warriors received the admiration and gratitude of all, as did the most ingenious inventors - in short, those who contribute to the group. Thieves and murderers were executed or banished. Adolescent boys dreamed of glory constituted specially potent fuel for the creative process that constructed technology and civilization. This entire dynamic, the network of prescriptions and proscriptions, facilitated group cooperation, cohesion, morale, progress, and ultimately, survival.

So then how does the story of Adam and Eve end? They (or shall I say "we") are still evolving. Will we become more and more human - smarter, more compassionate, more creative - until eventually we become one with God/Source? Maybe in some symbolic sense we will come full circle back to the Garden. The story of Adam and Eve is a beautiful and powerful allegory. I hope what I have suggested fits the alternative interpretation to the traditional one; in fact it is the traditional understanding of Adam and Eve of the earliest Gnostic Christians. But let us look once again to the role of Eve and the Serpent before we wrap up this article.

Male And Female

The Gnostic Christians, whose legacy of sacred literature we find in the Nag Hammadi Library/Texts, read Genesis not as history with a moral, but as a myth with a meaning. These early Christians regarded Adam and Eve not as historical figures but as representatives of two principles - present within every human being:

Adam was the dramatic embodiment of psyche, or "soul": the mind-emotion complex where thinking and feeling originate. Eve stood for pneuma, or "spirit," representing the higher, transcendental consciousness.

Are you aware that there are two biblical accounts regarding the creation of the first woman. One tells us that Eve was created out of Adam's rib (Gen. 2.21); the other, that God created the first human pair, male and female, in his own image (Gen. 1.26-27). The second account suggests that the Creator God himself has a dual nature, combining masculine and feminine characteristics. The Gnostics generally endorsed this version and developed various interpretations of it. This version accords equality to the woman, while the Adam's-rib version makes her subordinate to the man. Note also, that "rib" can also have been translated as "side."

For the ancient Gnostics, the conventional image of Eve was not credible. That image presented her as the one who was led astray by the evil serpent and who, with her feminine seductive charm, persuaded Adam to disobey God. In their view, Eve was not a gullible female turned persuasive temptress; rather, she was a wise woman, a true daughter of Sophia, the celestial Wisdom (Wisdom in Greek is Sophia). In this capacity, she was the one who awakened the sleeping Adam. Thus in the Apocryphon of John, Eve says:

I entered into the midst of the dungeon which is the prison of the body. And I spoke thus: "He who hears, let him arise from the deep sleep." And then he [Adam] wept and shed tears ... He spoke, asking: "Who is it that calls my name, and whence has this hope come unto me, while I am in the chains of this prison?" And I spoke thus: "I am the foreknowledge of pure light; I am the thought of the undefiled spirit ... Arise and remember ... and follow your root which is I and beware of the deep sleep" (Stephan Hoeller, Gnosticism: New Light On The Ancient Tradition Of Inner Knowledge, Quest Books, 2002, p. 27).

In another scripture, On the Origin of the World, Eve is presented as the daughter, and especially the messenger (Messenger in Greek is Angelos/Angel), of the Divine Sophia. It is in the capacity of messenger that she comes as an instructor to Adam and raises him up from his sleep of unconsciousness. In most Gnostic scriptures, Eve appears as Adam's superior. The conclusion drawn from these texts is obviously different from that of church fathers such as Tertullian: man is indebted to woman for bringing him to life and to consciousness. When one studies Judaism one finds that Judaism teaches that "woman" is a higher creation than a man since every creation of God as detailed chronologically in Genesis follows a pattern of heightened "greatness"; culminating with God's highest creation before He finished and that being "woman". One cannot help but wonder how the Western attitude toward women might have developed had the Gnostic view of Eve been the widely accepted view, instead of the Patriarchal Monarchy developed in Roman Christianity.

Snakes And Serpents

Eve's mistake, the orthodox view tells us, was that she listened to the "evil serpent," who persuaded her that the fruit of the tree would make both herself and Adam wise and immortal. A treatise from the Nag Hammadi Gnostic collection, The Testimony of Truth, reverses this interpretation. Far from an embodiment of evil, the serpent is considered the "wisest creature in Paradise." The text extols the Wisdom of the serpent and casts serious aspersions on the Creator, asking: "What sort is he then, this God?" It answers that God's prohibition concerning the fruit of the tree is motivated by envy, because he does not wish humans to awaken to higher knowledge.

Neither are the threats and anger of the Old Testament Creator God left without reproach. The Testimony of Truth tells us that he has shown himself to be "an envious slanderer," a jealous God who inflicts cruel and unjust punishment on those who displease him. The text comments: "But these are the things he said (and did) to those who believe in him and serve him." The clear implication is that with a God like this, one needs no enemies, and perhaps no devil either. In fact, in the book of Isaiah God admits to being the only one to create good and evil both.

Another scripture from the same collection, The Hypostasis of the Archons, informs us that not only Eve but also the serpent was inspired and guided by the Divine Sophia. Sophia allowed her Wisdom to enter the serpent, who thereby became a teacher and then taught Adam and Eve about their true source. They came to understand that they were not lowly beings created by the Demiurge (in this case, the secondary Creator in the Genesis story - the Creator of this world)), but rather, that their spiritual selves had originated beyond this world, in the fullness of the ultimate Godhead.

While the mainstream version of Genesis says that after eating the forbidden fruit Adam and Eve fell from paradisiacal grace, the Gnostic Christian version says that "their eyes were opened" which as you are learning is a metaphor for gnosis. Although cursed by the Demiurge and his archons (rulers), the first human pair had acquired the capacity for gnosis. They could pass this on to those of their descendants who were inclined to receive it. Eve thus passed on her gift of gnosis to her daughter Norea, and Adam gave the same to his third son, Seth.

Nature of Gnostic Exegesis

What motivated the Gnostic interpreters of Genesis to proclaim such unusual versions of the creation story? Did they wish only to bitterly criticize the God of Israel, as the church fathers would have us believe? The several possible reasons are not necessarily mutually exclusive and in some cases ... are complementary.

First, the Gnostics, along with some other early Christians, and prepare yourself - looked upon the Old Testament God as an somewhat of an embarrassment. Members of the more intellectual echelons of early Christendom were people of a certain spiritual sophistication. Those conversant with the teachings of Plato, Philo, Plotinus, and similar teachers would have had a difficult time relating to a God expressing vengefulness, wrath, jealousy, tribal xenophobia, and dictatorial pretensions. How much more compatible with the refined philosophy of Gnosticism was the kindly and noble character of the New Testament Jesus and his teachings. The Gnostics might have simply drawn the logical consequences from this dichotomy and consigned the Old Testament God to the status of a demiurge, a lesser cosmic entity.

Second, as noted earlier, the Gnostics were inclined to interpret the old scriptures symbolically. Many scholars today realize that the Gnostics taught that the story of the Fall was a symbol for the human existential situation, not a recounting of a historical event. The "Fall", as many scholars write, represented a fall from the state of dreaming innocence, a kind of awakening from potentiality to actuality-an interpretation not unlike the Gnostic one we considered earlier above. Scholars endorse a concept closely resembling the Gnostic idea of "two Gods" when he speaks of "the God above God."

Third, the Gnostic interpretations of Genesis may have been connected with Gnostic visionary experiences. It is believed that through their explorations and experiences of divine mysteries, the Gnostics might have come to understand that the deity spoken of in Genesis was not the true and only God, contrary to what the Bible claimed, and that there must be a God above him. An unreachable God, and a manifest God.

A transcendent God, minimally involved in the creation and management of the world, would have been plausible in the eyes of many people living in the Greco-Egyptian-Roman milieu of the first centuries of the Christian era. The highly personal and painfully flawed God of the Old Testament had lost credibility even with many Jews, as the example of the philosopher Philo of Alexandria proves. This learned man, though a devout Jew, employed his talents in whitewashing the concept of the God of Israel by investing it with Platonic ideas. These included divine hypostases (emanated aspects of the Deity) such as the Logos [Christ] and Sophia, both of which were held in high regard by the Gnostics. Taking an even more radical and forthcoming stand, the interpreters whose words are contained in the Nag Hammadi scriptures reasoned that a God who behaved as Genesis and other books of the Old Testament described must be a pretender and a usurper, not worthy of worship or obedience. The OT God Jehovah/Yahweh was temperamental, and had anger issues.

The Gnostics understood the creation story in Genesis as mythic, and myths are necessarily subject to interpretation. Greek philosophers frequently looked upon their myths as allegories, while the common people saw them as a sort of quasi-history, and the mystae (initiates) of the Eleusinian and other mysteries brought the myths to life byway of visionary experiences. There is no reason to believe that the Gnostics approached myths in a manner substantially different from these. Joseph Campbell once described "myth" as "something that never was, yet always is."

Present-day liberal biblical scholars tend to view the biblical tales as mythic stories that people invented to try to explain the world around and above them. If this view is accurate, then the contradictions in the creation myth of Genesis are no more than reflections of the contradictions implicit in life generally. But the Gnostics, along with many other mystical philosophers of the ancient world, viewed mythic reality differently. They were more interested in understanding and realizing the world within than in explaining the world around and above them. The world within pointed to the world beyond, to transcendence, which was all-important.

The myths of the Gnostics are designed to stimulate experiences in which the individual soul transcends the world's limitations. To transcend, in their view, means to go beyond the limitations not only of materiality and matter, but also of mind. It is in the realm of psyche that contemporary psychologists have discovered the analogues of what the Gnostics called the archons and the Demiurge. As Carl Jung differentiated between the Self and the ego-the two "gods" in the psyche - so the Gnostics spoke of two gods, one transcendental, the other a bumbling secondary deity. Depth psychology seems to shed more light on the Gnostic understanding of the Judeo-Christian creation myth than liberal biblical scholarship does. Even so, there are probably meanings in these myths, or mythological themes, that elude the grasp of both psychologist and Bible scholar.

It is relatively easy to perceive the Gnostics as religious deviants as long as one does not think too deeply and logically about the nature and implications of such scriptures as the Book of Genesis. It is also not difficult to convince oneself that the reprehensible character of the Creator described in these scriptures is in no way compatible with that of the Father that Jesus spoke of in the NT scriptures. The two-Gods doctrine of Gnosticism certainly speaks more clearly to the ethical and logical sense of the human mind than does mainstream Judeo-Christian monotheism with its desperate desire to gloss over the glaring contradictions.

The creation myths of various cultures leave their imprint on the histories of peoples and nations. The Gnostics apparently made a valiant attempt to free the youthful Western culture of their time from the shadow of the Judeo-Christian version of the creation myth. If the alternative myth they suggested seems radical to us, it is only because we have been accustomed to the literal historical Genesis version for so many centuries. Many of the implications of the Gnostic version are in fact potentially useful for the culture of the twenty-first century. They can be applied in today's world. Perhaps the time has come to transvalue the Western creation myth, and if so, Gnosticism can serve as our helper and ally.

Just a thought ...

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